

Closing Panel: Key Issues for Early Childhood Programs

On the last evening of the Kellogg symposium, a small group of participants gathered with the goal of reflecting on the discussions of the previous two days and suggesting some priorities for programs designed to connect with parents about issues related to children's school readiness.

On Sunday morning, symposium organizers presented the list of priorities to the larger group of participants, who concurred that the list represented key issues for programs. The participants agreed to break into four groups (based on their areas of expertise) to discuss how their professions would attempt to assure that the priorities were implemented in programs serving young children and their families. The four specializations identified were: (1) public policy, advocacy, or the media; (2) direct service; (3) professional education and training; and (4) early childhood research.

Participants were asked to focus their small group discussions on providing examples of potential changes in their professional approach that would align with these four priorities to improve the capacity of parents, or those in the parenting role, to prepare their children for school.

After the small group discussions, Lisa Lee facilitated a panel discussion on Key Issues for Early Childhood Programs. The following four priorities were discussed in the Sunday morning small groups, from the perspective of each group's expertise:

1. Building a culture of mutual respect among parents and staff.
2. Sharing responsibility for defining school readiness and for defining how schools can be ready for children.
3. Providing adequate resources (financial, human, socio-cultural, and environmental).
4. Strengthening the capacity of staff to engage effectively with parents.

9. Increase staff understanding of learning styles.
10. Provide book- and toy-lending libraries if possible, including a staff person who is accessible to parents to address their needs or questions.
11. When possible, hire staff who reflect the culture of the families in the program; at the least, encourage staff understanding of the conditions of the community and issues in the home.

Group # 3—Teacher Education and Staff Development

If professionals involved with teacher education and staff development are focusing on the four priorities, they will:

1. Use vignettes or case studies in preservice education and staff development.
2. Use examples that are complex enough that students benefit from learning to take the perspectives of social worker, educator, early intervention professional, and child care provider.
3. Clarify what mutual respect looks like when implemented in a program serving young children and their families.
4. Promote use of a strengths-based approach and focus on resilience in parents and families.
5. Focus on intentional staff development, including talking with staff both individually and as a group about their preferences for additional training and support.
6. Collaborate with universities to work with staff in research or on staff development.
7. Develop a culture of hope and resilience.
8. Create staff awareness that there is a parent’s “bill of rights” and that parents have a right to expect certain things from a program.
9. Encourage innovative ways to look for solutions to problems facing families.
10. Provide information for students about how systems work—including state and national political systems and community infrastructures.

Group #4—Researchers

If professionals involved with research are focusing on the four priorities, they will:

1. Analyze whether these priorities represent “the right questions” and whether our knowledge base is solid enough to know what “the right questions” are.
2. Analyze the research base to determine how it addresses the four priorities.
3. Clarify who should have a voice in the development and dissemination of the research (Parents? Caregivers? Experts?).
4. Clarify what we, as a society, expect with regard to school readiness. Is our society so competitive that the bar is always set higher; should every child be “above average?”

5. Develop ways to research “cultures of trust.”
6. Expand the research on understanding the bridge between getting children ready for school and schools being ready for children.
7. Invest in longitudinal research on activities such as home visiting.
8. Conduct rigorous experimental studies.
9. Focus on replicating studies that have shown a demonstrated relationship between parent-staff communication and child outcomes.
10. Clarify what staff characteristics are likely to improve school readiness and parent-staff interactions (e.g., is there a relationship between increased salaries and better communication with parents, or between salary and staff stability?).
11. Give parents a voice in the research process.
12. Interpret data within a cultural context.

Questions/Comments in Response to Panel Presentations

Participants offered the following comments in response to the panel presentations:

“Another piece of research is the direct tie between program quality and child welfare. Also, the role of qualitative research really helps us think about the design as well as what types of questions should be asked.”

“What research has [been] shared with parents? Most of what we know about parents and contributions to school readiness comes from correlational research. When you look closely at some of the data that are shared about the developing child and the correlational research—the relationship is pretty modest.”

“Programs are on the line. We want to be mindful that researchers don’t know everything and that parents don’t want to hear from researchers that our best guess is that if you do x then y will happen. However, if we continue to use simple answers for parents, then we are doing a great disservice.”

“If the desired outcome is for children to be happy, builders of peace, and be happy as human beings, but we put pressure on parents to achieve if they don’t do x , y , and z , then perhaps we are doing a disservice. Parents should not be so concerned with winning or losing when their child is so young.”

(Question directed to parent participants): Oversimplifying research for parents—how do you feel about that in terms of the messages? Would you still have been interested in the program if the staff home visitor said, “Our best guess tells us this will help?”

“In my case, there weren’t any specific promises made, and I probably would have been more skeptical if there had been.”

“We need to say a little more about the fathers’ program—programs need to be flexible to discuss what is important to parents during that day. Parent leaders need to be humble but also have the ability to get things done. Action for fathers is important.”